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AUTHOR Armstrong, Joseph L.; Peters, John M.
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ABSTRACT

This study described and documented collaborative learning by students in two sections of a graduate education course at a large southern U.S. university. Ethnographic observations were made of the two groups, and participants were interviewed about their experiences in their respective groups. Analysis of field notes from ethnographic observations and interview transcripts revealed three categories of themes that described the process of collaborative learning: (1) group process; (2) learning process; and (3) group facilitation. The group process category contained the themes of cohesion, trust, respect, confusion, frustration, and conflict. The learning process category contained the themes of discourse, engagement, and questions, and the group facilitation category contained the themes of facilitator actions and participant as facilitator. Participants described their experiences in terms of the interaction of these themes. The findings show collaborative learning to be a multifaceted, complex process that can be understood in terms of knowledge construction, relationships, and participants' roles in facilitating their own and others' learning. (SLD)

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The Transformative Process of Collaborative Learning

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by
Joseph L. Armstrong, Morehead State University
&
John M. Peters, University of Tennessee

J. L. Armstrong

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A great deal has been written in recent years using the term "collaborative learning." A review of this literature reveals two specific limitations. First, there are multiple and varied definitions of collaborative learning, and before writing about or researching collaborative learning one must first define specifically what one means when using the term. Second, nearly all of what is written is written from the perspective of the facilitator of collaborative learning. That leaves open the question of how participants of collaborative learning experience collaborative learning. This study used Peters and Armstrong's (1998) definition of collaborative learning to identify two collaborative learning groups and examined the process of collaborative learning from the perspective of the participants in those two groups.

The study described and documented collaborative learning by students in two sections of a graduate education course at a large southern US university. Ethnographic observations were made of the two groups and participants were interviewed about their experiences in their respective groups. Analysis of fieldnotes from the ethnographic observations and interview transcripts revealed three categories of themes that described the process of collaborative learning in the two groups: 1)group process, 2)learning process, and 3)group facilitation. Each category

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had multiple themes. The group process category contained the themes of cohesion, trust and respect, confusion and frustration, and conflict; the learning process category contained the themes of discourse, engagement, and questions; the group facilitation category contained the themes of facilitator actions, and participants as facilitator. Participants in the course described their experiences in terms of the interaction of these themes, such that the themes created a patterned gestalt of the process of collaborative learning. The findings describe collaborative learning as a multifaceted, complex process that can be understood in terms of knowledge construction, relationships, and participants' role in facilitating their own and others' learning experiences.

Knowledge construction involved knowing that, knowing how, and knowing from within conversationally developed contexts created by the participants. Through the use of dialogue participants established relationships and developed shared meanings that became the background and context from which they constructed new knowledge. By doing so they created their own culture from which they learned. Shotter (1993a, 1993b) calls this "knowing from within," which he differentiates from two other kinds of knowing--"knowing that" and "knowing how."

Knowing that refers to having knowledge of rules, facts and beliefs; knowing how is practical knowledge. For participants in this study knowing that involved learning about collaborative learning. This kind of knowing was augmented by reading materials and class discussions. For example, by reading and participating in class discussions, participants learned that they were to suspend and examine assumptions and that some questions facilitated collaborative learning while others hindered it. They didn't know how these skills factored into the collaborative learning experience until they were able to practice them in class sessions. This

process of knowing follows Jarvis's (1998) distinction between merely having information and making that information a part of one's practical knowledge, which comes only from testing the information out in one's own practice or social life. The participants became aware of themselves learning the first two kinds of knowledge. They also became aware of interactions within their respective groups and how these interactions contributed to their knowing *that* and their knowing *how*. Thus, the participants developed a third kind of knowledge, which is referred to by Shotter (1993a) as "knowing from within". Such knowledge has been described as,

> the kind of knowledge that one has *only from within a social situation*, a group, or an institution, and which thus takes into account and is accountable to *others* as to whether its expression or use is ethically proper or not. (p.7) [emphasis in original]

Some authors have speculated that relationships in collaborative learning groups develop "in terms of learner to learner, learner to group, and group to learner" (Peters and Armstrong (1998, p.79). The findings of this study support the first two aspects of relationship in this characterization of relationships. The relationships in these two groups went beyond relationships between individuals in the groups (learner to learner) to include a relationship with the group as a whole (learner to group). Initially, participants felt a sense of individual relationship with other participants. However, their sense of relationship extended beyond individual relationship to include a sense of relationship to their respective groups. They expressed their relationship with the group as cohesion and commitment to their respective groups.

The group to learner aspect of relationship was not as clearly evident in these groups. One participant described his sense of the group as being a family, thus implying that he felt support from the group (group to learner) although he was the only participant to describe the group in

this manner.

Participants came to see how they were accountable to and responsible for each other and for the group as a whole. This is knowledge that came only from within the group, and it is knowledge that only has meaning within the group. As participants learned how their actions affected their own and others' learning, they began to assume responsibility for their own actions and to hold others accountable for their actions.

The belief that adult learners should assume responsibility for their own learning is not new to the field of adult education. Self-directed learning is founded on this very principle (e.g. Tough, 1971; Knowles, 1980;). Self-directed learning, however, is a theory of individual learning, and even though self-directed learners may assume responsibility for their own individual learning, they do not necessarily assume any responsibility for the learning of others. The participants in this study did assume responsibility for the learning of others. They were truly co-learners.

It was in terms of the interaction of these three categories of themes that participants in the groups accounted for their experience with collaborative learning. Thus, each individual theme needs to be understood within the context of the others. Collaborative learning is a multifaceted, complex gestalt involving more that simply "learning." It is also described by the relationships that participants form and their role in facilitating their own and others' learning experiences. Models and discussions of collaborative learning found in the literature usually do not describe with precision what the process is like in practice, especially for the participants in collaborative learning groups. Results of this study suggest that the reality of collaborative learning, as participants experience it, may not be aligned perfectly with certain concepts of the process held by writers in collaborative learning and related processes.

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